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ABSTRACT

This case study examined formative assessment of a first-year core course initiated in response to an external requirement. The paper discusses the campus assessment climate; describes how course faculty became proponents for assessment; explains how the core survey became housed in a larger student satisfaction survey; and outlines key elements of successful assessment programs. A researcher teamed with faculty to conduct the evaluation. The study examined the traditional knowledge and role of faculty in institutional assessment. Faculty, who were initially ambivalent or against formal assessment, were the primary audience. Qualitative methods were used to overcome faculty resistance. A research instrument was developed to assess the core program and students' satisfaction with their first-year experience. Nearly 600 freshmen completed the survey; student focus groups were also conducted. Assessment results were delivered during a faculty workshop. Faculty were given time to discuss questions and results. All instructors received printouts of their own and group results. Key elements of this project's success in developing faculty as stakeholders in assessment included: creating an interdisciplinary assessment team of faculty and staff; developing trust by listening to and respecting student and faculty viewpoints; and letting faculty adapt assessment to their own needs. (Contains 26 references.) (SM)

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Developing Faculty as Stakeholders in Assessment: A Case Study

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Developing Faculty as Stakeholders in Assessment: A Case Study

Abstract

A researcher at a private university teamed with two faculty members to assess a required, general education course. The assessment was formative rather than summative, or designed to inform activity in progress rather than judge ultimate success or failure. Creating a successful process demanded that the researchers not only utilize sound research practices but also examine the traditional knowledge and role of faculty in institutional assessment. Faculty, who were initially ambivalent or against 'formal assessment,' were the primary audience. The process through which faculty become assessment stakeholders will be outlined, as will general assessment "dos and don'ts" for working with faculty or other apprehensive audiences.

Developing Faculty as Stakeholders in Assessment: A Case Study

Introduction

Assessment of a first year general education course at a small, private university was initiated in response to an external requirement. In 1996, an external grant provided funding to develop a year-long, required, interdisciplinary, 10 credit, "Core" course. The grant-maker required serious attention to assessment. In addition to the familiar summative assessment, which evaluates successes and failures of a fully implemented program, the grant-maker asked the university to engage in formative assessment. Formative assessment was to be incorporated into the Core's development and implementation, formalizing reflection about goals and objectives and offering opportunities to modify the course mid-stream.

This narrative briefly discusses the assessment climate on campus, describes how Core faculty became proponents for assessment, how the Core survey came to be housed in a larger student satisfaction survey and outlines key elements of a successful assessment project. While the focus is on lessons learned at one institution, the presentation will incorporate theoretical literature, knowledge of faculty academic training and an analysis of colleges and universities' structures in discussing key elements that can be applied to institutions of any size.

Assessment Climate on Campus

Since instructional faculty at this campus often dismissed assessment as a dubious bureaucratic exercise, instituting meaningful formative assessment meant a change in culture. Assessment itself was not new, but formative assessment designed for faculty use was. Although an assessment plan with some mechanism for improving programs was and still is required for each department, faculty regarded administrators as the key audience. Other assessment programs included a five-year program review, accreditation efforts, the Comprehensive Institutional Research Project (CIRP) survey, and Career Center surveys of recent alumni. These programs also primarily served administrators or external audiences. The faculty-directed teaching and learning center on campus has sponsored luncheons on classroom assessment techniques, but attendance has been poor. Faculty members typically cited their overwhelming teaching loads (four classes per semester) and/or a belief that 'numbers' could not really measure the processes of teaching and learning as reasons not to become involved in classroom assessment.

Their reasons for not doing formal, quantitative assessments are not unusual. An American College Testing (ACT) survey of two and four-year public colleges found that over half of those who responded said that involving faculty in assessment was a significant problem (Steele 1996). The reasons faculty give for not wanting to do assessment differ a little from campus to campus yet

Schilling and Schilling (1998, p. 17 - 22) report that the concerns across all campuses can be reduced to a list of twelve. The twelve concerns that they cite are:

1. We already do it. (refers to faculty's role in assessing student achievement, i.e. grades).
2. The data will be misused. (refers to campus politics and the potential for data to be used to against them or not be used at all)
3. I'm afraid of change. (what will be asked of me next?)
4. The criteria are unclear. (how will you judge my work? Will I be one of the 'bad ones'?)
5. Assessment violates my academic freedom. (Will this work begin to shape or alter how I plan and teach my courses?)
6. Assessment is inconsistent with academic values. (Complexity of work not believed to be captured and no appreciation of academic expertise.)
7. Faculty lack knowledge of assessment. (really do not know what this work entails and/or how to do it.)
8. I have no confidence in existing instruments. (They can identify holes in current instruments or pinpoint areas that are not measured.)
9. Too often, what is tested becomes what is valued. (It is hard to measure character growth, internal cognitive process involved in analyzing literature etc.)

10. We don't need more bureacracy. (Believe resources used for assessment could be better used in teaching/learning process.)
11. My plate is too full. (Many already feel overburdened by teaching, research, committee and advising demands.)
12. Nobody told me about the shift from teachers and teaching to students and learning. (May disagree with with premise that we need to focus on what students have learned; may not have been included in discussions that change focus from teaching to student learning.)

There were over 30 faculty members involved in teaching the Core program. Most of the faculty came from the College of Arts and Sciences but there were also a few from the College of Business and the College of Engineering. Either in informal or formal discussions the researchers reported hearing at least 10 of the 12 reasons cited by Schilling and Schilling. Setting up an assessment procedure that faculty would use to improve courses seemed a daunting task.

Key Step #1: Creating an Assessment Team

A team of several Core faculty, the university's institutional researcher, and two faculty consultants took up the challenge of developing a formative Core assessment program. Ferren reports, "Assessment programs that do not emerge from the unique needs of the institution and the specific capabilities of the faculty who are to carry them out and respond to the findings run into

significant resistance . . . To get commitment, faculty must be involved at the outset (1993, p. 5).

The Core faculty involved in this effort included the Core Director and members of the Core Steering Committee. Senior, tenured faculty and more recently hired faculty sat together on the Core Steering Committee and made final decisions on texts and syllabus for this important new University program. The research team was composed of an independent higher education evaluator who taught part-time in the Core program, a Sociology professor, who formerly worked as a survey research consultant, and the University's institutional researcher.

The survey questions related to the Core were housed in a larger instrument that attempted to capture the essence of students' first year experience. However, since the Core program had provided the impetus for the assessment project, the research team agreed that Core faculty would be the primary audience for assessment results and first to receive reports. Secondary audiences would be the University retention committee, the Provost's office, the assessment committee, the teaching and learning center, the chapel council, the honor's college, and the Athletics department.

The Core committee and research team began to work together. One member described the work as "exciting". She went on to comment that such a project was the first time she had experienced a true joining together of diverse institutional constituents. Her feelings and the work mirrored the words of Tarule and Tereault, "In its best form, assessment contributes to the life of the

academy in a way that promotes further thought, interpersonal and professional connections, and enhanced student development opportunities. To begin any assessment project is to enter into a conversation about all the important issues in education" (1992, pp. 49-50).

Key Step #2: Using Qualitative Methods to Overcome Faculty Resistance

The assessment team's first step was discovering student and faculty impressions of the former first-year required courses, as well as hopes and fears for the new Core course and experience. Deliberately, this process was not rushed. Over the course of eight months, qualitative methods were employed to gather the needed information.

> *Social researchers systematically collect and analyze empirical evidence in order to understand and explain social life. But a qualitative researcher goes about this differently than a quantitative researcher does. The most obvious difference is that qualitative data tend to be in the form of words, sentences, and paragraphs rather than numbers (Neuman, 1991 p. 321)*

The research team felt strongly that it was best to begin by listening. They listened to students and then they talked and listened to all Core faculty. They did this during convenient times. No faculty member had to give up designated work time to talk with the researchers. Students were invited to talk at times that did not conflict with class schedules.

In the spring of 1998, twenty-two freshmen were interviewed for forty-five minutes each by two female members of the research team.[1] The students communicated a preference for discussion-based teaching to lectures; they valued faculty whose concern for them went beyond the classroom, and had strong views about several texts.

These and other findings were presented at the Core faculty workshop in May. As the faculty struggled to establish common texts and a syllabus, many felt overwhelmed by information. Yet, when asked by a member of the research team to write about and discuss "signs of success" and "signs of failure" for the Core, they referred to and even quoted the student interviews.

Some of the student comments took on special meanings and were repeated by the faculty or repeatedly used to define specific concepts. Indeed the presentation of the qualitative student data gave rise to faculty discussion on assessment that was enthusiastic and enjoyable. Neuman writes that this is the typical effect of qualitative reports. "Most people find reports of qualitative research more enjoyable to read. Instead of a formal, neutral tone with statistics, qualitative reports often contain rich description, colorful detail, and unusual characters: they give the reader a feel for social settings (1991, p. 322).

In this way, the voices of articulate students helped shape Core goals and objectives and ease the faculty into the assessment process. As the faculty members voiced in small groups and in a larger group discussion, their hopes and fears about this new program, they unwittingly began to shape the final

[1] Ward and Grant (1985) and Grant, Ward, and Rong (1987) analyze research in sociology journals and suggest that women are more likely to use qualitative research techniques than men.

questionnaire and join the research team. The mood was upbeat and faculty were engaged in an optimistic exercise that gave voice to a cultural transformation.

> *Reflexive assessment moves away from a culture of fear and retribution and toward an understanding of how to create a climate for improvement. In effect, I am suggesting that rather than develop an evaluation system that looks backward and determines how well someone performed, we create a structure that looks forward and tries to outline how the individual and organization want to peform (Tierney 1998, p. 55).*

The faculty conversation on hope and fears for the new program was very productive. Not only did individual members get a chance to be heard but the group as a whole articulated the culture they wished to create. A research team member recorded all that was said and produced a document that organized and summarized the faculty's comments.

Over the summer, word about the Core workshop made its way around campus and piqued more faculty interest. Core faculty posed numerous questions, and by fall of 1999, agreed that a written survey instrument that would provide more representative information than interviews was needed. The culture surrounding assessment was beginning to change. The faculty had moved from negative attitudes toward research to a position of desiring more broad-based assessment tools.

This change in culture and faculty attitude goes against what many recent research studies have called faculty disengagement (Kennedy, 1997; Sacks, 1996; Shapiro, 1997). Kluge (1993) wrote:

> *Faculty have been encouraged to remove themselves, to disengage somewhat from a full, intense commitment to students. . . We're teaching less, there's less emphasis on faculty keeping office hours and attending meetings, more celebration of publication and other accomplishments. Students are aware of that, aware of it when you go from asking for four papers to asking for one, aware of it when you go from ten office hours a week to two. That suggests disengagement (p. 38).*

The faculty at this institution were committing not just to a writing intensive course that was discussion based and demanded that they meet with students individually over the course of the semester but to a new role in assessment. Faculty were engaged and becoming intricately involved in how the future of this program would be formed and evaluated.

Key Step #3: Creating the Research Instrument

Research on the advantages and disadvantages of commercial survey instruments and information from assessment conferences and literature led to the decision to develop a survey in-house. The goals of the survey were two fold: the first was to assess the Core program and the second was to assess student satisfaction with their first year experience.

The instrument has 150 total questions broken into 11 categories that range from satisfaction with academic and technical support to satisfaction with campus programming. The 11 sections represent the diverse institutional arenas in which students interact and which affect their overall first year experience. "Assessment efforts need to cut across courses to make connections within the academic experience to better understand the degree to which attending college is meeting students' educational and social needs" (Sanders and Burton, 1996, p. 556).

Because the survey was designed to serve two primary groups: Core faculty and members of the Retention Committee, care was taken to make sure both groups saw and were able to comment on consecutive drafts of the survey. Like the initital qualitative processes, this process was also time consuming. The creation of the instrument took four months and mandated numerous revisions.

Like other institutions, this one had a loosely coupled retention network. The central belief of loosely coupled retention networks is usually that smaller units within the institution know their clientele the best (Kluepfel, Parelius, Roberts, 1994). Thus, the member of the research team charged with survey design met with a diverse group of people. They included members of residence life, representatives of the campus chapel, a student-athlete advisor, an engineering professor, the Director of Multi-cultural affairs, the Dean of Students, an employee who worked in financial aid, the head of the academic help program and students in a spring semester general education class. The

involvement of so many groups undoubtedly contributed to the survey's long length but also established a link between faculty and staff and students.

Each group represented by a staff or faculty member were at first somewhat territorial, concerned almost solely with 'their section'. Thus an early draft of the questionnaire missed one of the most talked about components of first year college life: food! This oversight was quickly pointed out by the students in the general education class, underscoring the need for any assessment of college life to include students in all phases of the project.

Key Step #4: Delivering the Results and Re-involving Faculty

The university's first survey of all freshmen, administered in class during the second week of April, 1999, focused on the Core experience in the context of broad academic and student life issues. Nearly 600 students (90% response rate) completed a questionnaire that asked 150 questions about their first year experience. In addition to the questionnaire, other new methods of assessment were developed and some traditional forms retained as well. Focus groups involving thirty-three freshmen were held in late spring, using questions similar to those of the previous year's interviews. The assessment team also provided faculty with grade distributions by section, gender, and race, and worked on a course evaluation with questions about specific texts and class exercises.

Because some faculty were not receptive to quantitative measurements of teaching and learning and others were ambivalent about 'numbers-oriented' assessment, much care was taken to deliver the results of the survey and other

assessment efforts in a way that faculty could "own" and use. The initial results were given during the end-of-the-year faculty workshop. This is a two-day workshop at which Core faculty gather to talk about the experience of the Core program and plan for the following year's changes.

The presentation was interactive and given without a lot of statistical language. A comic poking fun at the validity of survey answers was the opening overhead. The report of initial results focused on key areas relating to the qualitative assessment of faculty's stated hopes and concerns for the course. Care was taken to not provide too much information too quickly. No statistical models were presented and indeed several faculty needed to be reminded of what some consider the most basic statistical terms i.e. mean, correlation, standard deviation. Differences between men and women and between those of color and those classified as white were highlighted. The role of GPA in students' willingness to express satisfaction was examined.

Lively discussions took place over questions and results. The faculty debated: should they care more about students seeing the Core as their favorite class? They attempted to make sense of the findings that that men were more comfortable participating in class discussions than women but reported less growth than women in critical skill areas commonly associated with the ability to discuss well. They ultimately focused in on two or three items that they were interested in working on for the following year. They did this in faculty cohort groups.

In addition to the large group presentation, each instructor was given a printout of his or her results and how those results compared to the overall group means. Individual faculty members were allowed to use these results however they saw fit. Some contacted the researchers for follow-up data, some contacted the researchers to have statistical terms re-explained and some filed their reports but did not look at them again. While the first two responses were more pleasing to the researchers, the freedom to respond in a variety of ways allowed assessment to be seen as less heavy-handed and more accomodating to faculty needs, time constraints, level of knowledge about measurement and numbers and individual philosophies regarding the nature of teaching and learning. Cross and Angelo (1984) wrote that classroom assessment should respect the autonomy, academic freedom and professional judgment of faculty. Decisions on how to respond to information gained from assessment techniques should be made by the individual faculty member if assessment is to be endorsed by faculty and integrated into their role in the university.

At the end of the presentation, the faculty asked intelligent questions and provided thoughtful suggestions for analytical methods. They wanted to continue the survey as well as interviews or focus groups. A Core faculty member from psychology, with a background in structural equation modeling using survey data, joined the assessment team to help with analysis. He and more than thirty Core faculty from various departments are now stakeholders in the assessment process.

Additional presentations of data were given to the institution's retention committee, the administrator's forum, the Honor's college and the chapel concerns' committee. "One of the most important benefits of assessment is the data's ability to raise the critical questions, thereby setting the institutional discussion and decision agenda. . . .faculty-administrative conversations, grounded in the data, provide the primary opportunities for university leadership to effect positive change" (Young and Knight, 1993, p. 29) At the end of the first year, the interplay between faculty and administrators, brought about by the inclusion of the Core assessment in the survey of first year students' satisfaction, was beginning to create an environment in which assessment was taken seriously and used more frequently in day-to-day decision making. Faculty were engaged and had become stakeholders in the assessment of their own program and in the assessment of how that experience fit into the larger experience of first year students.

Conclusions

Key elements of this project's success in developing faculty as stakeholders in assessment include: 1) creating an assessment team consisting of staff and faculty, across disciplines, and from insider and outsider perspectives; 2) developing trust and furthering collaboration by listening to and respecting student and faculty viewpoints; 3) following the natural pace and rhythm of faculty (meetings after graduation, for example); 4) addressing faculty concerns and building consensus behind the scenes; and 5) once they become stakeholders, letting faculty adapt an assessment program to meet their needs.

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